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THE WIDOWED EARTH

HARRY ALONZO BRANDT

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THE WIDOWED EARTH

A Dramatic Poem

BY

HARRY ALONZO BRANDT

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THE WIDOWED EARTH

DRAMATIS PERSONÆ

PAGAN—*A sea-captain.*
YOUTH—*An ardent youth.*
JUNIUS OR JOB—*A poet.*
FIRST FRIEND, SECOND FRIEND, etc.
SCENE—*A modern seaport.*
TIME—*Now.*

THE WIDOWED EARTH

PROLOGUE. NEW WINE

You pipe of golden years,
And dream that Pan appears
Beneath the tangled trees,
Or by the shady pine,
With Bacchic hosts that dine
And dance with naiades.

You blow the mellow praise
Of dead, romantic days,
Till knights begin to gleam
And flash before your eyes,
And charge the kings that rise
By castled hill and stream.

What if you pipe and sing?
Not all your reeds can bring
To life your mythic year!
For earth is old and wise,
And all her mountains rise
Through forests gray and sear.

Then gone, forever gone,
Is earth's Arcadian lawn;
And so, let pagans weep
For nymphs in leafy glade,
For all the feasts they made,
For gods and men who sleep.

But shall I quake and dread
Because the past is dead?
Nay, fool! This is the time
To change my coat and fare,
To crop my tangled hair,
And build the living rhyme.

Wherefore, a curse on Pan!
For I shall sing of man!
Of man, I smite and go
Through all the ranging keys
Of human melodies
That spring from present woe!

I. THE PAGAN

It is night. Pagan strolls along the streets of a great city reveling in the sights that are new as well as old.

Pagan

Right glad I am at last,
To leave the swaying mast
Behind; to seek again
The pleasant ways of men,
Exploring every street
Where friendly pagans meet.
Aha, see here displayed
Whatever man has made
Of gold! Old pirate would
Make booty of this store
Of stones and costly ore,
These rings and tropic wood!
If I were not content,
And now on pleasure bent,
It would be kingly sport
To rob this wealthy port!

Enter Youth and Junius. The last is some paces behind and continues to stand at a distance.

Pagan

What luck! Here comes a strong
And thoughtful youth. A man
Whose face is lean and long
Will surely fit my plan.
Sir Youth, yon moody man
In rags, tell me, how can
He look so cynical
About the carnival?

Youth

The man in rags? Aye so.
Yon Junius, Sir, you know,
Has neither house nor purse;
Therefore, whereof to curse!

Pagan

Indeed, a sounding name,
A very sounding name——

Youth

But hard unfeeling minds,
Or hearts where pity finds

No place, would care to run
His name into a pun.
My Sir, it would appall
If you could know him all
And all, could stand with him
Upon the very rim
Of immortality,
And then, yes, then, should see
Great hopes and splendid power
Receding hour by hour!

Pagan

What tale of woe is this?
On me such ravings miss
Their mark. Behold me now!
No foolish thoughts endow
My heart with weak pity.
But look, and truly see
I am a man at home
Wherever sailors roam.
Can I be weak or sick
When pleasures lie so thick?
Aha, see here displayed
All fruits of skill and trade;
Yes, every sensuous thing
The art of man can bring!

Behold these lofty piles,
Whose goodly courts and aisles
Are paved with wood and stone
That kings would fight to own.
And here, upon this wall,
Great silken curtains fall,
Of webbed lace as white
As foam-draped Aphrodite.
And there, is savory meat,
With wines both sharp and sweet,
Perfumes, and fruit, and spice,
Yes, all that can entice
The pagan heart! Here too,
The while my wonder grew,
I heard the rhythmic beat
Of many choral feet,
Of voices wrought in song
With laughter echoed long.
Shall happy men repent?
Not I! This world was meant
To be the variant toy
That brings us health and joy!

Youth

And hence, no sorrows roll
Across your hardened soul!

Pagan

Well, no, for when at last
The watch upon the mast
Spies out the home city
Across the shining sea,
Then the heart is glad!
For all the crew is mad
With joy to see the land
Whereon the cities stand.
'Twas so last night. There lay
The towns across the bay,
Gray white along the west
As Phœbus came to rest
Behind such clouds as lie
Along a sunset sky!
We watched until the day
Was gone. The mansions lay
In shadows as the gown
Of ebon night sank down
Upon the painted town.
And then a timid light
Defied engulfing night;
It was a kindling spark
That smote the gloom and dark
Until the wide city
Became one galaxy
Of starry pageantry!

Youth

I, too, have looked amazed
Upon great towns emblazed,
Until there came a note
Across the ocean moat,
A boding voice, that moaned
And died, and growing droned
Like distant tides at sea
That come eventually
To seize with crushing grip
Upon the aspen ship!
This boding minstrelsy
Of runic murmurs swelled
In chords that laughed and knelled
Until their shriek and cry
Moaned of the souls that die!

Pagan

Ha, ha! The changeful tune
Is not a mystic rune!
It is the cry of steel
And trenchant grinding wheel;

Or seething melting pot
Of metals whited hot,
With echoes of the street
Where Cork and Aden meet!

Youth

Perhaps, but I can see
Its boding mystery.

Pagan

Ha, ha! I weep to see
Such gloomy fantasy!
(*Junius steps nearer*)
Well, now, my moody knight,
That scornest all delight,
Tell me, at carnival
Are not we friends to all?
Therefore, tell us your name,
Your part and jest.

Junius

My name? My Sir, a name
Is not a name, except

The wit of some adept
Link it with jest or shame.
Wherefore, my brazen man,
But only waiting can,
With truth, disclose to thee
My soul in misery.

Pagan

Well, now, in every speech
My friends begin to preach!
Alack, the fates will send
Me to a tragic end!
Indeed, what shall I seek?
For when I dare to speak
The brooding landsman grows
Vehement or morose.
The fates will make of me
The sport of sympathy.
But fie! I know a cup
That lifts the spirits up!

II. THE UPAS TREE

It is morning, and Pagan is early upon the streets. The crowds are just beginning to hurry by.

Pagan

The day begins, but gray
And sombre vapors lay
Far-streaked and mingled by
The towers that reach the sky.
The narrow sinuous street
Cuts by the granite feet
Of giant piles, whose cold
Hard walls, steel-ribbed and old,
Look insurmountable.
The gorge between is dense
With men, impassable,
Except to many tense
And haggard men, weak spawn
Who drift and eddy on
I know not where. Forlorn
Is day a very morn!
For in this dismal place
I see no choral face,
Or sign of carnival
From night's gay capital.

(Enter Junius)

What now? The moody leer
Of yonder cavalier
Recalls a starry light
I saw on yester night.
Here, then, I have a guide,
And earth is not so wide,
But that through him I may
Begin to clear away
This rune of night and day.
The jest, my man, the jest!

Junius

My weary soul be blest!
But why tell you the jest?
Indeed, my name might be,
Junius, in raillery;
Again, some call me Job,
Since I must wear his robe.
But now, that you are mine,
I give you tears for wine.
I say the past is dead,
For hills where shepherds fed
Their flocks and piped a tune
From dawn till drowsy noon

Are now a heap of slag!
See where the toilers drag
The disembowelled hills
Up to the maws of mills;
And where by giant wheel,
By cold resistless steel,
By measured steady shock,
They grind the living rock!
At last earth's treasure-hold
Must give its utmost gold.
Therefore new temples stand
Upon the cratered land,
Wherein are heard the hoarse
And clanging songs of force;
While nauseous vapors lie
Across the blackened sky.
Then gone, forever gone,
Is that Arcadian lawn!
Its flocks and choral men,
Its nymphs and leafy glen,
Are gone! And pagans weep
For gods and men who sleep.
But shall I wail my fate
That I am come so late?
That I am set when old
Conceptions cannot hold?
When ancient flasks of wine

Would drug your hopes and mine?
Nay, fool, I do not seek
Arcadia or the Greek!
What? To lie and pipe
When all the world is ripe
For men who see and sing
Of all new facts may bring?
The world will welter till
Its bards have drunk their fill
Of earth's new wine of woe;
And, therefore, shall I go,
And, therefore, shall I drink
To drowse, to brood, to think,
For thus I know I can
Sing true of troubled man.
Thus may I smite and go
Through joy and human woe.
See yonder doors of brass
And steel, where toilers pass:
The beardless youth, women,
Children, and broken men,
A horde of young and old
To cut, to sew, to fold
From dawn till late. Yes, long
Into the night the song
Of wheels and shuttles bright
In mad and burning flight

Will hum and drone, until
An agonizing train
Of endless murmurs fill
The stunned and stifled brain!
Here is a little thing
The toilers come to sing:

Work, work, work,
With never an hour to pause or wait,
But only a ceaseless strain
From dawn till late.

Work, work, work,
With never a thought, but just to strive
To worship the senseless wheels
That ever drive.

Work, work, work,
Filling up my cup with hate and gall,
And letting the long days weave
The worker's thrall.

Work, work, work,
So binding my life in part and whole;
The pall of an endless task
Has slain my soul!

Work, work, work,
Yes, work for the gods and men who slay!

The end is a house of blood,
Is dust and clay!

Pagan

Alas, complaining Job,
Your speech becomes your robe!

Junius

Aha! Then hear again,
For I will speak for men:

I saw a goodly princess stand
Within the crowded market place;
The people praised her matchless form
And Roman face.

For in her hand a balance swung;
She was the law for small and great.
Then at her feet a man was flung,
The people wait—

The people wait and mutter while
The man is slashed through flesh and bone;
They turn their faces from the sight,
But hear his moan.

Their king was of red Herod's type;
And though his hands were dripping blood,
The mighty smiled and bade him join
Their brotherhood.

Does not the princess judge her race?
Or will she leave the small to fate
That crime and greed may twine to serve
The cruel great?

But then I saw her seemly form
Was ribbed with age and lichen grown!
Oh, God! La Belle Dame sans Merci
Was rotten stone!

Pagan

My Job, at last I see
A poison grief in thee!

Junius

Is aught I say the fruit
Of fool or drunken brute?
And if my song is sad,
No need to call me mad!
For if I sing of man

I am no Caliban.
Hear once again my speech,
For this is what I teach:
The city is the spot
Where nations start to rot,
For here the nations mate,
Here breed, here congregate,
Until the fight to live
Consumes what love should give.
And here ambitions lead
To hate, insatiate greed;
And these pollute and breed
In every heart. Indeed,
Cities destroy us, for
They nurse the seeds of war!
Therefore, this capital
That seems at carnival
Is full of poison breath,
Of hidden bones and death;
Is but a upas tree
That spreadeth misery!

Pagan

Alas for grief! for when
The speech of living men
Is on the vital air
You brood in blind despair!

III. THE HOUSE OF BLOOD

Evening has come, and Pagan is upon the street. He is seeking for any diversion that may help him to forget the gloomy experience of the morning.

Pagan

Now comes the close of day,
And now shall night allay
All grief, for they who weep
Forget their tears in sleep.

(*Enter Youth*)

Youth

Oh, Sir, kind Sir, and can
You help a wounded man?

Pagan

What now? I am no priest!

Youth

But, Sir, he has not ceased
To call for you; 'tis late
And other friends await——

Pagan

But if I do not know
The man——

Youth

Then will you go?

Pagan

Alas, for whom or where?

Youth

With me; I'll guide you there.

(*Exit*)

In a small and dimly lighted room two men stand conversing near the door. A third person is stretched out upon a low bed in the corner of the

room. This last is Junius, or Job, and the other two men are his friends.

(Enter Youth with Pagan)

Youth

Here, friends, a friend! Give room!
See there, in gathering gloom
And bitter misery,
Is he who begged for thee!

Pagan

What? And this is Job,
In blood and tattered robe?

Youth

It is, for this is he
Who cursed the wide city;
But now as one who feels
The crunching of the wheels
That grind, he speaks—that grind
Both flesh and eager mind.
He has a fearful wound,
And often has he swooned,

But still, in spite of pain,
The man sometimes can gain
His voice—until the blood
Bursts in a gurgling flood
Upon his lips——

Junius

Oh! Oh!
If death must take my soul
The grave will be my goal!
Oh—
As one who fed the steel
Beneath the shaping wheel,
I learned to race the great
Machine at daring rate,
And laughed when I would choke
With heat or burning smoke,
Until—my flesh was caught
And torn, yes, crushed and wrought
Into a foolish pack
Of blood and rags! Alack!
Alack, that life should stop
In some great sooty shop!
For now no deed shall sound
My little name around
The world, but I shall rot

In some unhallowed spot!
Oh—
What? To fear and quake?
To pant? To curse? To shake?
Aha! Old Death may take
What crumbs of life remain,
For since my hopes are slain,
In sacrificial cup
My life is lifted up!

First Friend

I will not waste my breath
Upon a toast to Death,
For since the grave is near
A friend should speak sincere.
I will not mollify,
Or try to mystify.
My words are sharp and plain,
But they are golden grain.
Then hear, my fainting Job:
I know your faded robe
Does ill become the part
Of your ambitious heart;
Yet, pride is not condemned
If love of power is stemmed,
Controlled, and made to serve

Sane thought and steady nerve.
I know you hoped to toy
With high ambitious lays
Like one who sang of Troy
And Greece in ancient days.
We know his robe and fare
Were vile, but did he swear
As you? The poet's mind
Is keen, eager, refined.
Why then should deepest wrong
Embitter all your song?
The great do master woe,
In truth, refine it so
The very utmost pain
Distils the grand refrain.

Junius

So immortality
Is born of misery?
My God! when will you din
Of sweeter doctrine?
And now my day grows late,
For Time will never wait,
And I must pass, I fear,
Before my high career.
Why mock at pain and death?

I have no health or breath.
Tell me, what goodly thing
Did dead men ever bring?
Alas, I pass, I fear,
Before my golden year—
I faint, I cease to speak
Before I reach my peak!

Second Friend

My words shall not be bent
Or barbed with argument.
So let this tale of mine
Distil as oil and wine
Upon an ancient sore.
I mollify my speech,
And if I seem to teach,
Then I shall speak no more.
There was an eager youth
Who lived in times, forsooth,
When in the tuneful air,
The earth, and everywhere,
Each cloud, or stone, or clod,
Embraced some petty god.
"A god?" the youth would ask,
"A god in such a mask?"
Then to his priests he said:

"Are gods alive or dead?
Are gods so vilely grown
They live in shapeless stone?
How beautiful is all
The living world! I call
Upon the gods that live!
And to their souls I give
The fairest lineament
In earth or firmament!"
But when the priests had heard,
Their utmost wrath was stirred.
"Away with him! In truth,
We ought to stone this youth!"
But with this sentence said,
The youth escaped; he fled
Unto the hills, and there
Alone, with love and care,
He carved him gods again,
But fair and formed as men.
In later times a race
Of wiser men were bred,
And when they found the place
To which the youth had fled,
They put his scattered bones
Beneath his gods, and raised
A house of burnished stones
Wherein his name is praised.

Junius

I know that men should wait,
In patience contemplate
The crown of olive leaves.
Perhaps some distant day
Unnumbered satellites,
Some cults, some parasites
Of fame will come to prey
Upon my name, and I
Shall live because I die!
But, friends, you know this leaves
My present needs and grief
Untouched. Why not relief
From pain that far outweighs
Some dole of future praise?
What man but longs to live
For what this earth can give?
I give my scanty dole
Of crowns, yes, friends, the whole
Of all the ages give
That here and now may live!
Oh, empty, empty vaunt,
How many men are gaunt
With starving all their days
Upon the wine of praise!
So take my crowns and gold,

All tears and garments old,
All shame and sacred vow,
But give me here and now,
With life, and every mirth,
The very fat of earth!

Pagan

Alas, I find the key
Of all your misery
Too late! A pagan friend
You are, and this will rend
My heart! Had I but lent
My gold we should have spent
This night at bacchanals,
At happy carnivals—
But now, when we should dine,
Thou givest tears for wine!

IV. THE WIDOWED EARTH

The place and the persons are the same as for III. But a few minutes of time have elapsed.

Youth

Now see the Pagan weep,
But not from Bacchic sleep!
Now are the aged still!
But why? Does wisdom fill
The heart of burning youth?
Is he the ward of truth?
Aha, in teeming years,
White hair, and many tears,
You say is wisdom found!
Why then does Job confound
The wise and solemn seer?
Are you too old to hear
Him hurling bitter words
Like flocks of tropic birds?
My soul is past restraint
At hearing Job's complaint.
Have I not heard him speak
Defenses for the weak?
Have I not seen him give
His crust that men might live?
But now the subtle seed
Of selfishness and greed,

With all he sought to slay,
Comes at the last to lay
Its stamp upon his soul.
But if his shining goal
Is lost, I shall not blame,
Much less in aught defame
The man, but shame, but woe,
On all that makes him so!
And now, look you at Job,
For I will seek to probe
His heart. Behold his form,
Wherein the stress and storm
Of wide diversity
Will give no mastery.
Does not his lofty brow
Suggest a priestly vow?
And yet, would cheek of lip
Let what is sensuous slip?
I shall not mock the plaint,
Nor shall I scorn the tear
Of such as Job, who faint
And die in full career;
Yet I will answer him
Before his eyes are dim.
Yes, Job, and all, give heed.
There is in him the seed
Of death. Did not he say

With scorn, and madly pray:
"I give my scanty dole
Of crowns, yes, friends, the whole
Of what the ages give
That here and now may live!
Aye, take my crowns and gold,
All tears and garments old,
All shame and sacred vow,
But give me here and now,
With life and every mirth,
The very fat of earth!"
My Job, indeed one can
Call this the beast in man!
If this sums up the whole
You have no poet's soul.
My fainting, dying seer,
At death it does appear
Your heart is full inclined
To self. Your eager mind
Has feared too much the price
Of holy sacrifice.
Have you no travail when
Despair would ruin men?
Yet once your voice was strong
Against the rule of wrong.
Why now, for self and mirth,
Despise the widowed earth?

But think what savage strife,
What wars for very life,
If all the world should be
In Job's philosophy!
Behold, my friends, and see
I speak no mystery,
For in these savage years
Our traders laugh at fears,
Since out of wars and pain
They cull their bloody gain.
For these new cannibals
Grow fat on carnivals
Of hate! For blood, rich-red
And warm from mangled dead,
Will yield a gold return.
Because our merchants yearn
With deep insatiate greed
For gain, the nations bleed.
If wealth remains the goal
Of our fat trader's soul,
What of the end? The end
When shrieking nations rend
And slay? Such homicide
Will end in very deed
With nations crucified
Upon a cross of greed!
For while the strong contend

Their bitter wars do rend
The innocent and weak.
Alas, the earth shall reek
With flesh, and graves shall lie
Unnumbered as the sky
Of countless stars! What then?
What then if broken men
Shall come to loathe the kings
Whose pride and hatred brings
Ten nations to the pits
Where Death with Ares sits?
And what if seers shall fail,
And purblind poets wail
And curse, or fight to hold
Some pot of bloody gold?
What, then, if all the world
Is caught and backward hurled
Into a sea of slime,
Of primal ooze and crime,
Until the awful flood
Makes earth a house of blood?

First Friend

Behold, torrential speech,
Sir Youth, can never reach
The ear of Job, nor he

Reply. Let courtesy
Bestow what love is led
To lavish on the dead.

Pagan

Alas, the man is dead!
Is dead upon a bed
Of clotted blood! So lay
His stiffened corpse away;
But soft and gently, friends,
For love with kindness lends
Our final gift. Is dead—
My God, the man is dead!
But what can now be said
For widowed earth? Will she
Sink, too, in misery?

Youth

Alas, my friends, you see
How Job's philosophy
Begets us wars and fears,
And hurls the nations back
Upon the weltering track
A thousand precious years—
And yet I want to live,
O God, I want to live!

Perhaps a better earth
Shall find its holy birth
In all our loss and woe—
But I, how can I know?
And yet I want to live
To strike with mace and sword,
With wit and kindling word,
With might and lyric song
At hydra-headed wrong!
I cannot lie and pipe
When all the world is ripe
For men who work and sing
Of what new truth may bring.
What if the earth be slag
And graves? The brave shall drag
Debris aside, forget their hate
And reconstruct the state.
For when our wars shall cease,
And men remember peace,
I, too, would toil and wait
With those who rear the state
Anew; who build again
The homes of simple men!

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